

# What's so funny about the imagination?



## Four ways humour encourages students to be creative

By Matt Stanton

*'Creativity and humour are identical. They both involve bringing together two items which do not have an obvious connection, and creating a relationship.'*

— William Fry, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, Stanford University \*

According to research conducted by psychologist Richard Wiseman in 2002, the world's funniest joke is as follows:

*Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, 'My friend is dead! What can I do?' The operator says 'Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead.' There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says, 'OK, now what?'*

All the sessions in my Stretch Your Imagination School Tour start in the same way. 'Hello! My name is Matt. I make funny books.' This statement is absolutely true — all my children's books are intended to be funny. This is not because I've never grown up into a proper, functioning adult. It's also

not because I don't know how to be serious. I choose to make funny books for a very deliberate reason.

I am convinced that humour is one of the most powerful tools to encourage children to read and to activate their imaginations.

Humour is often dismissed as simply silliness or time wasting. Surely we have more important things to do? It's also much easier to manage a class if the laughter is left in the playground. However, I've come to believe that humour, especially humour in books, can actually be one of our greatest assets when it comes to helping reluctant students flex their creative muscle.

There are four ways that I believe this to be true:

1. humour relaxes students
2. humour unifies students

3. humour encourages students to read regularly

4. humour engages students' minds.

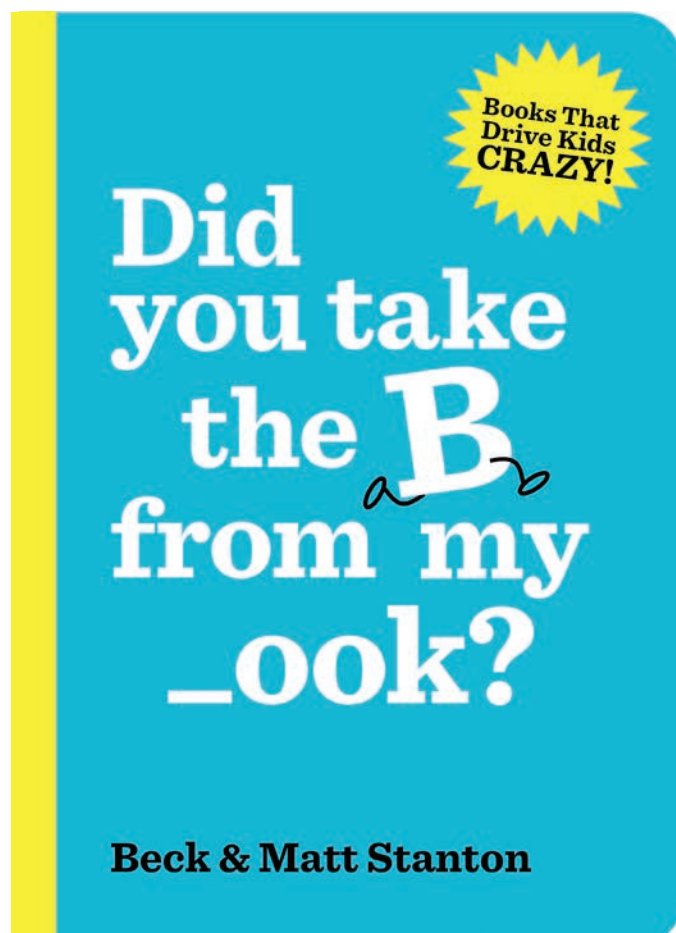
Sometimes it requires some humility. I'm often doing something mildly ridiculous in front of a class when a little voice in my head says, 'I always thought I was going to be something respectable, like a lawyer.' It also demands that we be creative ourselves, and with Thinking Imaginatively and Creatively being such a core part of the National Curriculum, I can't think of a better time for us to use humorous children's literature to its full potential.

### 1. Humour relaxes students

There is a story I tell to open each session on my schools tour.

Students often already know who I am from some of my books (especially *This is a Ball*, which I created with my wife, Beck Stanton, and *There's a Monster Under My Bed Who Farts*, which I created with Tim Miller) but, regardless, when I stand up in front of a class for the first time, I'm a stranger to them. Their eyes may be wide with curiosity, but mostly they're suspicious. Who is this man who's going to talk to them for the next hour? What am I going to make them do? Will they want to do it?

Defensiveness. Suspicion. I can't think of two more powerful enemies of the imagination, except for perhaps fear.



And so I start by telling them a story. It's actually a completely true story about the first story I ever wrote. I was in kindergarten at the time, so I begin to draw the picture that I drew as a five-year-old. As I draw a picture of my head, they're curious, but they don't let their guard down yet. I draw my shoulders, arms and legs in a sitting position. The classroom is mostly silent at this point, save for some shifting and shuffling on the carpet. Silent until they realise that I'm drawing a picture of me sitting on the toilet.

Quiet laughter begins to ripple through the classroom. It's soft to begin with because they're trying to work out if they have permission to find this funny. When I turn and admit that, yes, this is a picture of me on the toilet, the laughter comes freely.

It's not the laughter that I hear the loudest, however. It's a different sound. A more important one. It's like a gentle exhalation as they collectively relax the muscles in their bodies. The story I go on to tell is not gross, but it is funny, and it instantly connects me with the students in the room. It's the sound of defences coming down and suspicion ebbing away. Through the humour, they see that I want them to enjoy our hour together, that laughing is allowed, and even important, to the work that we're going to do.

John Morreall, president of Humorworks Seminars, says, 'Humour loosens up the mental gears. It encourages out-of-the-ordinary ways of looking at things.' \*

If the imagination is like a muscle, then students can't do anything with it if it's tensed and cold. I'm finding that humour is an invaluable tool in helping students to relax and warm up. Let's not confuse humour with rowdiness or lack of control; instead it is about allowing freedom. When students (and teachers) feel free to laugh together, that is the same freedom that allows them the confidence to express their imaginations in bold ways.

## 2. Humour unifies our students

Creativity flourishes in free and collaborative spaces, where ideas can be freely thrown around and improved on. I spent more than a decade working in a design studio. The room was open and light, and while everyone had their own projects, there were no physical barriers between desks and multiple common working spaces. We knew that ideas can be generated in conversation and that they can be amplified and improved on when we throw them around the room like a hot potato.

I know this to be true in my book work too. Both of my picture-book series are collaborations and even as I work on my chapter book series for 2017 (a solo endeavour), it's the interaction with editors, publishers and my inner circle that is a rich and vital part of improving and refining ideas. The imagination is at its best when it can be stimulated by other imaginations nearby. In order for that to happen, students need to feel connected to each other and trust each other.

I'm often very aware in the classroom that I will never know everything that is happening socially within the class. I won't know what's just gone on in the playground, what's been said over social media or who didn't get invited to a party or play date. I also don't know all that's going on in the inner world of the children in my class — their self-talk, their insecurities, their self-doubt. However, I do know that I need to find ways to draw children together to help them to think imaginatively and creatively.

Well, everyone loves to laugh. In fact, is that not part of what makes something funny to begin with? The recognition of a shared experience, illuminated in a new way. Do you ever find yourself listening to a comedian share a funny take on a daily activity like getting the kids ready for school, navigating the supermarket or fighting with the photocopier and you hear yourself saying to the person beside you, through fits of laughter, 'That's so true!'

Humour in itself is unifying and a class of students laughing together about the same thing is incredibly powerful. It disarms, it distracts and it erodes barriers that get built for myriad reasons. It also unifies

teachers and students. To share a moment of laughter is to connect and to create a safe space for children to be brave, which is what the imagination requires of us. When students look at each other as they laugh and as they enjoy connecting, we know we have prepared the ground for a rich, creative experience.

### 3. Humour encourages students to read regularly

Did you know that 74% of children in Australia say that they would read more if they found more books that they liked? \*\*

And do you know what the number one thing that Australian children look for in a book is? I reckon you could. Yes, stories that make them laugh. \*\*

Here's a confession. Personally, I don't really read funny books. I read widely, as I'm sure you do: award-winning fiction, page-turners, research papers, interesting non-fiction, cookbooks, biographies and gorgeous picture books.

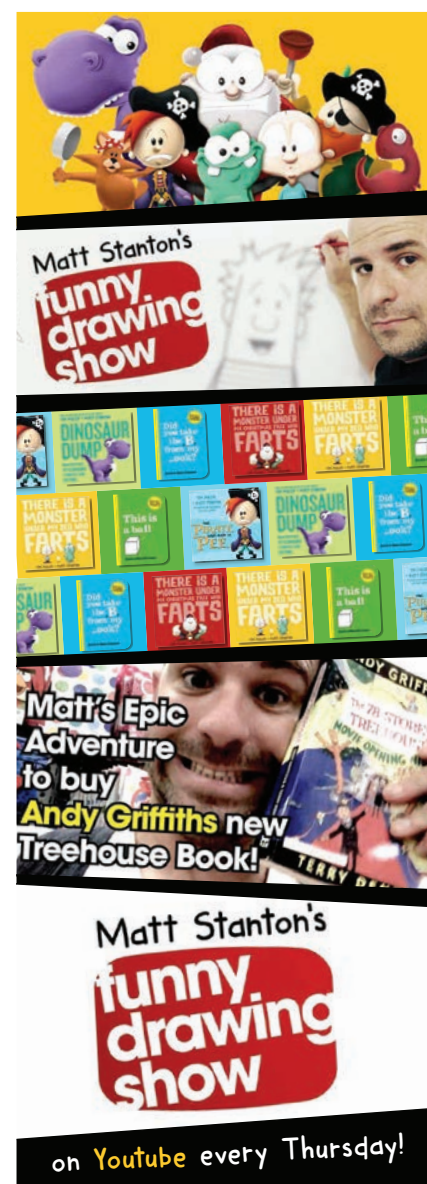
But as a child, I did read funny books. I loved them. I first started swimming in the world of books with Roald Dahl, Paul Jennings, Morris Gleitzman and even the early books from superstar Andy Griffiths. I believe Griffiths deserves significant credit for the work that he has done for literacy in this country, because we all know, even those of us who write funny books, that

**Hello.  
I'm Matt.**

**I make  
funny books.**



**mattstanton.net**



humour is not the end game. Books that make children laugh entice them to the joy of the written word. That's my own story. I fell in love with reading because of the experiences I had with books. As a middle-grader, those moments were about humour and joy. Sometimes books would make me laugh as I read them alone, sometimes they would make me laugh as I read them with a teacher or parent. As I did this, my confidence in reading improved and I was tempted to try other books. I started to read books that would make me think and feel. From reading Duncan Ball in grade





4 to reading Bryce Courtney in grade 6, funny books were bridges to other kinds of reading and other kinds of books. And I've never stopped reading since.

In his thesis, 'A Descriptive Study of How Humour in Literature Serves to Engage Children in Their Reading', Matthew Zbaracki quotes Schallert and Reed (1997):

*Over time, readers who have experienced the pleasure of becoming absorbed by a text will develop a sense of the types of texts or tasks that will successfully cause*

*involvement and of the conditions that need to be in place for them to be able to re-create the joy of autotelic experiences. Thus, one consequence of deep involvement is to motivate readers to want to read, to find reading a rewarding, sought-after activity that can displace other recreational activities. \*\*\**

Nothing inspires the imagination like reading does. When engrossed in a book, children are not just passively observing a story as they might on television. Instead, they are forced to use their mind's eye to become complicit in the story's very creation. Is that not the joy of reading that we all know?

Humour, therefore, is a powerful tool in drawing students to the printed page. The number one thing that encourages students to become regular readers is when students read independently, books that they choose. Students who read regularly are students who are actively using their imagination, broadening their vocabulary, expanding their world view, developing empathy and building resilience through mental role play.

#### 4. Humour engages students' minds

*This is a Ball* is a CBCA Notable picture book that Beck Stanton and I created together. Everything in this book is incorrect. The text says, 'This is a ball,' but the picture on the opposite page is of a box. Due to the high modality of the text, when I read this book to students they are compelled to correct me. As the book continues, it gets more and more crazy until we have multiple characters, settings and objects on the page and they're all incorrect. Students find themselves laughing at the absurdity of it, united in their disagreement with me and arguing vehemently for the truth.

This engaged and interactive reading experience could never be described as passive reading.

In fact, nearly all forms of humour require active engagement with the joke's text in order to understand it. If we look back at the world's funniest joke above, the humour comes as we realise that 'let's make sure he's dead' can be understood in two vastly different ways. We see that the first way we interpreted its meaning was not the only meaning that could be deduced. In other words, the humour is in reflection. The punchline forces you to review what you've just read. It says, if you engage in this text, if you study it, you will be rewarded.

Active readers read beyond words. They read ideas. They read to 'get it', to understand the text, not just to finish it. They learn that within the words printed in front of them the writer has gifts to offer them, which if they engage with the text, they can discover. I agree with William Fry — creativity and humour stretch the same muscle. The skills are the same, whether students are using them to understand humour, to read actively or to create something of their own.

The reason that I do what I do is because I believe that books inspire the imagination, imagination births creativity and creativity changes the world.

The work that we are doing together, encouraging children to discover books and to fall in love with reading, is crucially important work. In 2016, now more than ever before, we are competing with the latest devices, video games and social networks for students' attention. To fight that fight, I am committed to using every tool in the toolbox, and I have found that having

**Exciting opportunity for NSW Primary Schools!**



The **National English Curriculum** places significant weight on teaching students to **Think Imaginatively and Creatively** (ENE-10C). To support teachers in this program, bestselling children's author and illustrator Matt Stanton has developed a **1hr session for Early Stage 1 to Stage 3 students**, which he is touring around NSW Primary Schools for a **strictly limited time**.



**Do any of your students feel daunted by the blank page?**

**Do any of your students feel frustrated when they can't get what's in their head onto paper?**

**Do any of your students get stuck creating the same thing over and over again?**

**Do any of your students say 'I can't do it'?**

Highly interactive, engaging and funny, Matt's sessions teach students the power of their imagination by **scaffolding a repeatable process for creativity**. He leads them through a story about imagination, discusses **setting, character and story structure** and works with all the students to create a unique character, which they can use to **compose their own literary texts** (EN1-10C, ACELT1607, ACELT1586). Each session is differentiated to suit ES1, S1, S2 and S3, ensuring that all students leave the sessions knowing that they have an imagination that is easy and fun to use and with the confidence of a **step-by-step system** to overcome creative obstacles. **Pre- and post-session activities** are also provided to enhance the learning experience.





Matt Stanton is a young bestselling children's author/illustrator. A quarter of a million copies of his books are in print. His critically acclaimed Books That Drive Kids Crazy series, created with his wife Beck, has been included on the **CBC Notables List**, been shortlisted for **ABIA Children's Book of the Year** and is listed on **Better Reading's Top 50 Books for Children**. He is also the co-creator of the mega-bestselling Fart Monster series and is working towards the international launch of his middle-grade series in 2017 - chapter books for fans of **Andy Griffiths** and **Aaron Blabey**. He speaks regularly with the **Sydney Writers' Festival** and the **Somerset Celebration of Children's Literature**, and stars in a weekly **YouTube show** providing free funny drawing lessons to primary students.



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humour in our classrooms and having funny books on our shelves are some of the most powerful tools available.

So, what's so funny about the imagination? If we give students the chance, they'll show us that there are many answers to that question. They'll probably also make us laugh a lot along the way.

## References

\* From Happily Ever Laughter, Peter Daskoch, *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199607/happily-ever-laughter>

\*\* *Kids and Families Reading Report Australia*, Scholastic, YouGov, 2015.

\*\*\* Schallert & Reed (1997), p. 79, as quoted by Matthew D Zbaracki, MA, 2003, 'A descriptive study of how humor in literature serves to engage children in their reading'.